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AUTHOR Hsieh, Chia-lin; Shen, Jianping
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ABSTRACT

Based on a national data set, a study investigated the factors that influence parents' decision to choose schools for their children. The data for the study were extracted from the public-release data file from the School Safety and Discipline (SS&D) component of the 1993 National Household Education Survey. Parents with children in 3rd through 12th grades from the 50 States and the District of Columbia were interviewed. The total number of completed SS&D interviews was 12,680. From this data, parents' choices were grouped into the following categories: (1) assigned school (public school district assigns the neighborhood school to the residents); (2) chosen school (there are two situations in chosen school: first, parents choose the public school that is not located in their neighborhood; second, parents like the specific public school district so they live in this area in order for their children to attend this neighborhood school); (3) private school (parents choose to send their children to a private school where the parents have to pay tuition for their children.) Among 12,680 parents, 10,017 chose assigned school, 1,382 parents chose chosen school, and 1,281 parents chose private school. Parents' education level and family income do affect parents' position on school choice. White parents with higher education and income levels are more likely to choose private school, while black parents with higher education level and lower family income are more likely to exercise their choice within the public school system. Parents who look for quality indicators such as small school size, homogeneous ethnicity, and safer schools have the propensity to choose private schools. Parents who look for quality factors such as proximity, median school size, and safe schools have the tendency to choose assigned schools. (Contains 19 references.) (MLF)

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Title: The Effects of Parental Characteristics on School Choice
Author: Chia-lin Hsieh & Jianping Shen
Institution: Western Michigan Univ., College of Education, Kalamazoo, MI 49008

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C.L. Hsieh

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Author: Chia-lin Hsieh & Jianping Shen
Institution: Western Michigan Univ., College of Education, Kalamazoo, MI 49008

School choice has been a hot political issue for more than a decade. In 1986, the National Governors' Association endorsed the goal of providing choice among public schools. In the nation's first "Education Summit" in October 1989, President Bush and the 50 governors agreed on choice as a major facet of the nation's education policy agenda. Thirteen states now have statewide choice plans on the books and dozens of other states have taken formal legislative action to increase the educational choices available to parents (Cookson, 1994; Lee, 1994). The purpose of this study is to inquire into the characteristics of the parents who (a) select private schools, (b) make choices within the public schools, and (c) do not make choice within the public schools.

Literature Review

In the literature, the following are identified as the major factors related to school choice.

Family Characteristics

Parents education and employment. There are more conclusive evidences indicated that better educated parents are more likely to choose their children's schools. For example, Cookson (1994) reported that educated parents more frequently exercise choice than do the uneducated. Martinez, Godwin, and Kemerer (1996) also found that choosing parents are more than twice as likely as nonchoosing parents to have attended college.

Income. Findings from research on the link between income and school choice are suggestive, but mixed. Evidence indicated an inverse relationship between income and choice. Plank, Schiller, Schneider, and Coleman (1993) concluded that low-income and minority families would take advantage of expanded choice if available. Darling-Hammond and Kirby (1985, 1988) and Strate and Wilson (1991) also found that low-income parents were more likely to consider alternatives to their local public schools, but upper-income parents had less reason to consider alternatives because of their access to better schools. Lee, Croninger, and Smith (1996) also confirmed what other studies of choice have found: Poor and minority families in school districts with a weak resource base favor school choice as an educational policy.

Race. Several studies demonstrated the tendency that minority favors school choice (Lee, 1996; Schneider, Schiller, & Coleman,1996). For example, Cookson (1994) and Witte, Bailey, and Thorn (1993) reported that minority parents are more likely to exercise the choice option than are white parents. Findings also suggested that white parents may have different options about school choice (Lee, 1996; Plank, 1993; Strate, 1993). For example, Lee (1996) reported that parents living in predominantly white suburbs surrounding downtown Detroit do not share this negative view of their local schools; they feel much less urgency over school choice.

Gender. Several studies do provide evidence regarding the relationship between choice and gender and indicated that gender plays an important role in school choice. West (1995) and David (1997) reported that more parents of girls than boys opted for single-sex schools. Co-educational schools tended to be preferred for sons than daughters. Similarly, Martinez, Godwin, and Kemerer (1996) and Witte (1996) concluded that there are more female children in the choice program than male children.

Perceived School Characteristics

Many studies revealed that school location and school size affect parents' support of school choice. West (1995) reported that more white than black or Asian parents mentioned the school's proximity to home as an important factor. The finding was consistent with those in the U.S. Department of Education survey (1991), which indicated that 50% of public school parents reported having considered the quality of public schools when making their residential location decisions and that 18% reported public school quality as being the most important factor in their residential location decisions. However, Lankford (1992) found that the importance of location decisions has not been fully taken into account in research on school choice because they cannot afford housing in areas with high-quality public schools. Some evidences indicated that most of the parents chose schools because of proximity and the racial and social composition of the school, rather than on the basis of instructional program (Bridge and Black, 1978). For example, Lee (1996) and Wells (1996) reported that when poor and minority families choose schools, they may consider not only a schools' overall

EA 030491

effectiveness, but also its effectiveness with children who come from backgrounds like their own. In addition, they relied on anecdotal information and the perceived social status of the school. West (1995) stated that more parents of girls than boys liked the school they were applying to because they were small.

Research Purpose and Questions

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Based on a national data set, the main purpose of the study is to investigate the factors that influence parents' decision to choose schools for their children. The findings and conclusions will provide the knowledge for understanding parents' perspectives of choosing schools for their children. The research questions are: Does parents' position on school choice change depending on family characteristics such as parents' education level, income, race, and gender? Does parents' position on school choice change depending on school characteristics such as location, size, race composition, and safety? Do families who choose schools consider different qualities from families who do not choose?

Methods

Sample and Weighting

The data for this study were extracted from the public release data file from the School Safety and Discipline (SS&D) component of the 1993 National Household Education Survey (NHES:93). Parents with children in 3rd through 12th grades from the 50 States and the District of Columbia were interviewed. The total number of completed SS&D interview conducted with parents of 3rd through 12th grades was 12,680.

Because the sample design of NHES:93 involved stratification, disproportionate sampling of certain strata, and clustered probability sampling, the resultant NHES:93 sample was not a representative sample. A relative sample weight, which was based on NHES:93 parents' final weight, was used not only to approximate the population, but also to adjust it down to the actual sample size of the study. Thus, the findings of the study are generalizable to the national scene.

Three Types of School Choice

In this study, these kinds of choice were distinguished. *Assigned school*: Public school district assigns the neighborhood school to the residents. *Chosen school*: There are two situations in Chosen school. First, parents choose the public school that is not located in their neighborhood. Second, parents like the specific public school district so they live in this area in order for their children to attend this neighborhood school. *Private school*: Parents choose to send their children to a private school where parents have to pay tuition for their children.

Results

The relationship between school choice and family characteristics

Among 12,680 parents, 10,017 parents chose assigned school for their children, 1,382 parents chose chosen school for their children, and 1,281 parents chose private school for their children. *Father's education level & Mother's education level.* The data indicate that those parents with a bachelor's degree or a graduate degree are more likely to choose private schools ($x^2(8)=206.31$, $p<.001$) ($x^2(8)=327.11$, $p<.001$) (Table 1 and 2). *Family income level.* Parents with annual income greater than $60,000 are more likely to choose private schools ($x^2(6)=344.92$, $p<.001$) (Table 3). *Child's race.* There is a higher percentage of white children in Private schools and a higher percentage of black children in Chosen schools ($x^2(8)=274.75$, $p<.001$) (Table 4). *Child's gender.* There is a higher percentage of female children in Private schools and a higher percentage of male children in Assigned schools. However, the relationship between gender and school choice is not statistically significant ($x^2(2)=5.45$, $p=.07$) (Table 5).

The relationship between school choice and school characteristics

Home location. A higher percentage of parents who chose Assigned schools said the choice of home location is influenced by the school and a higher percentage of parents who chose Private schools said home location is not influenced by school ($x^2(2)=80.60$, $p<.001$) (Table 6). *School location.* A higher percentage of parents who chose Assigned schools said schools are located in the neighborhood and a higher percentage of parents who chose Chosen and Private schools said no ($x^2(2)=677.13$, $p<.001$) (Table 7). *School size.* A higher percentage of parents who chose Private schools reported smaller schools and a higher percentage of parents who chose Chosen schools reported larger schools ($x^2(6)=776.10$, $p<.001$) (Table 8). *School race composition.* A higher

percentage of parents who chose Private schools reported homogenous race composition and a higher percentage of parents who chose Chosen schools reported heterogeneous composition ($x^2(4)=134.34$, $p<.001$) (Table 9). *School safety.* A higher percentage of parents who chose Private schools said school is safer than neighborhood ($x^2(4)=512.20$, $p<.001$) (Table 10).

Discussions

Parents' education level and family income do affect parent's position on school choice. Parents with higher education level have the propensity to choose private school while parents with lower education level have the tendency to choose assigned or chosen schools. The data also point that higher income families have the tendency to choose private schools while lower income families are more likely to choose chosen schools. Race also affects parent's position on school choice. Caucasian children have the propensity to study in private schools while African American children tend to study in chosen schools. More girls attended private school than boys. In summary, the relationship between parents' position of school choice changes depending on family characteristics. White parents with higher education and income levels are more likely to choose private school for their children.

The relationship between parents' position of school choice changes depending on school characteristics. Parents who look for quality such as small school size, homogeneous ethnicity, and safer school have the propensity to choose private schools for their children. Parents who look for quality such as proximity, median school size, and safe school have the tendency to choose assigned schools for their children. Parents who choose chosen schools seems to see these qualities are important, but not as critical as private school and assigned school parents felt. However, they feel that school's proximity to home is not an important factor for school choice.

One of the strengths of this study is the use of national data set. The findings of the study are generalizable to the national scene. From this study, we found that parents' education, income, and race do play an important role in school choice. This is much in line with other studies (Cookson, 1994; Martinez, 1996; Lee, 1996). White, working parents with higher education level and higher family income are more likely to exercise their choice beyond public school system while black parents with higher education level and lower family income are more likely to exercise their choice within the public school system.

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Table 1
Distribution of School Choice in Father's Education Level

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig.	Eta squared
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	206.31	8	***	2%
11th grade	15.4%	13.2%	5.9%				
High school diploma	33.1%	33.3%	21.6%				
Associate degree	26.9%	28.4%	29.8%				
Bachelor's degree	11.9%	10.4%	18.2%				
Graduate school	12.7%	14.7%	24.6%				
Total	100%	100%	100%				

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

Table 2
Distribution of School Choice in Mother's Education Level

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig.	Eta squared
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	327.11	8	***	2%
11th grade	16.8%	18.9%	3.9%				
High school diploma	37.4%	35.9%	27.1%				
Associate degree	29.8%	29.9%	35.4%				
Bachelor's degree	8.8%	8.0%	18.3%				
Graduate school	7.1%	7.4%	15.2%				
Total	100%	100%	100%				

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

Table 3
Distribution of School Choice in Family Income Level

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig	Eta squared
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	344.92	6	***	1%
< $15,000	22.7%	28.1%	7.9%				
$15,001-$35,000	34.1%	35.1%	25.8%				
$35,001-$60,000	19.3%	17.1%	21.7%				
>$60,000	23.9%	19.7%	44.5%				
Total	100%	100%	100%				

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

Table 4
Distribution of School Choice in Child's Race

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig	Eta squared
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	274.75	8	***	0.09%
White	75.3%	59.8%	84.6%				
African American	15.7%	28.0%	7.0%				
American Indian	0.9%	2.2%	0.4%				
Asian	1.9%	2.7%	2.9%				
Other	6.2%	7.2%	5.2%				
Total	100%	100%	100%				

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

Table 5
Distribution of School Choice in Child's Gender

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig.
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	5.45	2	.07
Female	48.6%	50.2%	52%			
Male	51.4%	49.8%	48%			
Total	100%	100%	100%			

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

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Table 6
Distribution of School Choice in Home Location

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig.	Eta squared
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	80.60	2	***	1%
Yes	48.8%	44.1%	35.1%				
No	51.2%	55.9%	64.9%				
Total	100%	100%	100%				

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

Table 7
Distribution of School Choice in School Location

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig.	Eta squared
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	677.13	2	***	5%
Yes	72.4%	43.2%	47.8%				
No	27.6%	56.8%	52.2%				
Total	100%	100%	100%				

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

Table 8
Distribution of School Choice in School Size

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig.	Eta squared
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	776.10	6	***	5%
Under 300 students	11.7%	14.0%	41.5%				
300-599 students	38.9%	36.1%	36.1%				
600-999 students	24.4%	23.6%	14.0%				
1000 or more students	25.0%	26.4%	8.3%				
Total	100%	100%	100%				

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

Table 9
Distribution of School Choice in School Race Composition

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig.	Eta squared
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	134.34	4	***	0.8%
<25% of child's race	11.1%	16.8%	13.0%				
25 to 75% of child's race	40.2%	46.8%	30.2%				
>75% of child's race	48.7%	36.4%	56.7%				
Total	100%	100%	100%				

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

Table 10
Distribution of School Choice in School Safety

	School Choice			x^2	df	Sig.	Eta squared
	Assigned	Chosen	Private	512.20	4	***	4%
School is safer than neighborhood	12.8%	21.7%	37.3%				
School safety = neighborhood safety	70.5%	64.0%	55.7%				
School is not as safe as neighborhood	16.8%	14.3%	7.1%				
Total	100%	100%	100%				

* <.05; **<.01; ***<.001

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